

Parents, students, teachers speak out against Detroit school closures

Shannon Jones
5 April 2010

At town hall meetings last week, Detroit parents and teachers denounced plans by Detroit Public Schools Emergency Financial Manager Robert Bobb to close 44 schools and implement other cuts as part of his school reorganization plan. Bobb's plan will mean the elimination of at least 1,500 jobs of school employees.

The town hall meetings were the first in a series announced by Bobb. The meetings are being poorly publicized and tightly managed. Speakers are preselected, with each school allowed only 20 minutes to make its case to avoid the axe.

There has been an obtrusive police presence at all the town hall meetings, lending an air of intimidation. Those attending have to walk through metal detectors and have their handbags searched.

The latest wave of closures follows the shuttering of 27 schools last year. The additional closures will mean that nearly half of all Detroit public schools open in 2006 will be shut down.

The wholesale assault on public education goes hand in hand with plans by Detroit Mayor David Bing to close down whole sections of the city, cutting off all city service to residents of the most impoverished areas.

Bobb is working closely with a group of wealthy philanthropic organizations to replace the closed schools with a network of private and semi-private charter schools that would open the door to drastic cuts in salaries and benefits for teachers and the elimination of seniority rights and work rules.

SEP supporters distributed a leaflet at town hall meetings last week at Henry Ford High School, Cooley High School and Cody High School. The statement calls for the building of a working class movement to defend public education, independent of the Detroit Federation of Teachers (DFT) and the Democratic Party. (See, "For a working class movement to defend public education" <http://www.wsws.org/articles/2010/mar2010/scho-m30.shtml>)

The SEP statement denounced the town hall meetings as a fraud and warned that Bobb, with the backing of Mayor Bing and Democratic Michigan Governor Jennifer Granholm, was preparing to force through the school closures over public opposition.

About 200 parents, teachers and students attended the meeting at Henry Ford High School Monday night. Many parents and teachers came with hand-lettered signs opposing school closings in their neighborhoods.

In opening the meeting, Bobb gave a perfunctory, disjointed presentation of his consolidation plans, repeating his mantra about creating an "education marketplace." The plan he outlined was based on a projected continued, drastic decline in enrollment. The ongoing decline in enrollment is fact an intended byproduct of the relentless campaign of school closures, as thousands of students leave the public schools for charter schools or simply drop out.

At the town hall meeting at Henry Ford High School, DFT President Keith Johnson spoke. His remarks were cowardly and servile. "I am aware you are going to have to close some schools," he told Bobb. He made no criticism of the ongoing plans to turn large sections of the Detroit schools system over to for-profit charter schools, merely pleading with the school finance czar not to close 44 schools simultaneously.

The DFT is working closely with Bobb to stifle any opposition among teachers and parents to the ongoing dismantling of the public school system in the city. In December, Johnson forced through a concessions contract that imposed a \$500 monthly pay deduction from teachers and cuts to their health benefits. Hardly had these cuts been imposed before Bobb announced a new massive round of school closures.

At the Henry Ford town hall meeting parents and

teachers spoke about the hardships the school closing would impose on families with children. Many cited the long distances children would have to travel and the impact of school closures on already hard-pressed neighborhoods. Five schools in the Henry Ford High School feeder area are set to close—Coffey, Holcomb, McKenny, Taft, Langston and Charles Wright.

Gail Tabor, who spoke on behalf of parents and teachers at Coffey Elementary, summarized the grievances of many parents. She explained the devastating impact of school closings. “When a school leaves a neighborhood, the soul of that neighborhood dies. We have enough blight. This will be another indication of the failure of Detroit.”

Tabor cited difficulties in transportation and security for children walking long distances or traveling by bus. She also voiced concern about putting lower grades in with middle school students.

The *World Socialist Web Site* spoke to some of those attending the town hall meeting at Henry Ford High School.

Francine Lee-Henry said, “My sister’s son is special needs, autistic. They are closing his school down for two years for rebuilding. The principal picked five teachers she wanted to keep and told the rest they are not coming back. There are 57 teachers at the school.

“My son can’t bring his textbook home from school,” Lee-Henry continued. “The teacher has to copy the material for the students. I asked the teacher to write down the names of the books and said I will go buy them myself.

“They serve green hot dogs and spoiled milk. I am at the point where I am ready to move out of Detroit to Oak Park or Southfield, because my son is not getting anything here. They don’t even have summer school for special education kids. It isn’t right.”

Karl Vogl attended with his son, Karl Jr., who is in 3rd grade at Charles H. Wright, which is scheduled to be merged with another school.

The younger Karl was planning to speak at the meeting. He explained why he was opposed to the school being merged. “I came so I can support our school. I don’t want to see the schools combined. It will be very hard for the little kids. There will be a lot more kids, and people will

get hurt in the halls between classes. There may be more bullies as well.

“In my class we have 27 students. How many more students can we fit in a class? If you have one or two kids that disrupt the class, the teacher can’t do anything about that. My principal might get fired,” he added. “She has been the best principal.”

Karl Sr. said, “They are trying to destroy the public school system. They have all the kids piled up in a few schools that will lead to violence, and people will pull their kids out of the public school system.

“They say that there are not enough kids for the schools, yet they just plan to turn these buildings over to charter schools. How will there be enough kids for charter schools if there aren’t enough for the public schools?”

“Education is a right for everyone. We shouldn’t see the public schools destroyed.”

Sharon Love, a parent with a daughter attending Holcomb Elementary told the WSWS, “My daughter is in the fifth grade. What is happening is pathetic. My baby gets two mozzarella sticks for lunch.

“Robert Bobb is like a steamroller bringing devastation, knocking things down,” Love said. “[Detroit Mayor] Bing too. I don’t like him. I am seeing more damage than good.

“How do they think they are going to make things better when they are putting more students in a classroom? You are putting all the children together, east side, west side, north and south. Will there be security for the children at the bus stops? I don’t see anything constructive coming of this.”

Love spoke about Bing’s plans for shutting down neighborhoods. “Shutting down schools will make neighborhoods deteriorate. They will move people out,” preparing the way for gentrification. “I grew up on the east side. Things got so bad that we had to move out. Now the rent is so high you can’t afford it. They have built condos that you have to have \$300,000 to get in.”



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact